

Spacecraft Designer Max Faget dies

by Amiko Nevills

The man who designed the original spacecraft for Project Mercury and is credited with contributing to the designs of every U.S. human spacecraft from Mercury to the Space Shuttle has died.

Dr. Maxime A. Faget, who in 1958 became part of the Space Task Group that would later evolve into the NASA Johnson Space Center, died Oct. 9 at his home in Houston. He was 83 years old.

“Without Max Faget’s innovative designs and thoughtful approach to problem solving, America’s space program would have had trouble getting off the ground,” said NASA Administrator Sean O’Keefe. “He also was an aeronautics pioneer. In fact, it was his work on supersonic flight research that eventually led to his interest in spaceflight. The thoughts and prayers of the entire Agency are with his family.”

Faget’s career with NASA dates back to 1946, when he joined the staff of Langley Research Center, Hampton, Va., as a research scientist. He worked in the Pilotless Aircraft Research Division and later was named head of the Performance Aerodynamics Branch. He conceived and proposed the development of the one-person spacecraft used in Project Mercury.

Faget was selected as one of the original 35 engineers who served as the nucleus of the Space Task Group to carry out the Mercury project. The group also devoted a lot of time to follow-on programs, and Faget led the initial design and analysis teams that studied the feasibility of a flight to the Moon. As a result of his work and other NASA research, President John F. Kennedy was able to commit the U.S. to a lunar landing by the end of the 1960s.

“Max was a genuine icon,” said NASA’s Associate Administrator for Space Operations William Readdy, “a down-to-earth Cajun with a very nuts-and-bolts approach to engineering. He contributed immeasurably to America’s successes in human spaceflight. His genius allowed us to compete and win the space race to the Moon.”



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“Max Faget was truly a legend of the manned spaceflight program,” said Christopher C. Kraft, former Johnson Space Center director. “He was a true icon of the space program. There is no one in spaceflight history in this or any other country who has had a larger impact on man’s quest in space exploration. He was a colleague and a friend I regarded with the highest esteem. History will remember him as one of the really great scientists of the 20th Century.”

Faget took part in the original feasibility study for the Space Shuttle. His team then focused on Shuttle development. He retired from NASA in 1981 following the second Shuttle mission (STS-2). His government service career spanned four decades.

continued on page 10

‘Gordo’s flying up ahead now’

by Kendra Phipps

Four sleek T-38 aircraft shoot across the sky during a cool, bright Houston morning. Suddenly one of them breaks away and soars straight up, impossibly vertical, until onlookers on the ground lose sight of it. It is still there, flying fearlessly, but can no longer be seen.

Four remaining members of an elite brotherhood were reduced to three when L. Gordon Cooper, one of the original Mercury 7 astronauts, passed away on Oct. 4. He may have broken away from the pack for now, but at a memorial service held at Johnson Space Center, his three comrades were certain that “Gordo” was there in spirit – along with Alan Shepard, Virgil “Gus” Grissom and D.K. “Deke” Slayton.

“Gordo’s flying up ahead now, with Al, Gus and Deke,” said Mercury Astronaut and Senator John Glenn. “I’m sure they’ll rendezvous up there somewhere.”

Glenn was joined at the memorial in the Teague Auditorium by fellow Mercury Astronauts Scott Carpenter and Walter Schirra. The three shared stories about Cooper and the early days of space flight.

Glenn recalled one time that Cooper had been fishing in a pond near a training facility. Afterwards, Cooper told an Air Force official that he met, “You have the biggest bullfrogs here that I’ve ever heard!”

“The guy said, ‘Mr. Cooper, those aren’t frogs, those are alligators,’” said Glenn. “And they were. I might add that Gordo didn’t fish there anymore after that.”

Carpenter spoke of the strong bond that the seven shared.

“The competition with the Russians forged a brotherhood that had no equal at that time – nor at this time, for that matter,” said Carpenter. “Gordon’s contribution was essential to the group’s solidarity, and we celebrate his contribution. At the same time, we remind ourselves that nothing of the construct of man stands forever. It is proper now to say, ‘Farewell, Gordon Cooper. It was an honor being a member of your fraternity.’”



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Schirra acknowledged the current and former NASA employees, some of them legendary, present in the auditorium.

“I look out in the audience and I see a lot of the people who gave us a safe ride, and I want to say thank you,” said Schirra. “We regret losing Gordo; he was one of our good friends, not too bad of a water-skier and a heck of a good astronaut.”

Also present was Henri Landwirth of the Astronaut Scholarship Foundation, who honored the impact that Cooper has had on countless lives.

“Many young boys and girls, young men and women, dream big dreams because of who he was and what he did,” said Landwirth. “Many of them reach for the stars because he flew among them. Many Americans have a greater love for their country because of what he did.”

continued on page 11



Clockwise: Dr. Maxime Faget, Director of Engineering and Development at the Manned Spacecraft Center and New Zealand visitor with Saturn V model.

Dr. Maxime Faget (center), goes over documents with Dr. George E. Mueller (second left), NASA's Associate Administrator for Manned Space Flight; and Charles W. Mathews (right foreground), Manager, Gemini Program Office.

Oil painting of Dr. Maxime Faget made from a Bldg. 8 portrait sitting.

After retiring from NASA, Faget was among the founders of one of the early private space companies, Space Industries Inc., established in 1982. One of its projects was the Wake Shield Facility, built for the University of Houston and flown twice aboard the Space Shuttle to demonstrate a technique for processing material in a near-perfect vacuum.

Born on August 26, 1921, in Stann Creek, British Honduras, Faget graduated from Louisiana State University with a Bachelor of Science degree in mechanical engineering in 1943. He joined the U.S. Navy where he saw considerable combat as an officer in the submarine service.

Faget's numerous accomplishments include patents on the "Aerial Capsule Emergency Separation Device" (escape tower),

the "Survival Couch," the "Mercury Capsule," and a "Mach Number Indicator."

He received numerous honors and awards, including the Arthur S. Flemming Award, the NASA Medal for Outstanding Leadership, and honorary doctorate of engineering degrees from the University of Pittsburgh and Louisiana State University. He was inducted into the National Space Hall of Fame in 1969 and the National Inventors Hall of Fame in 2003. Faget was the first recipient of the Rotary National Award for Space Achievement in 1987.

Faget was preceded in death by his wife Nancy in 1994. He is survived by four children: Ann, Carol, Guy, and Nanette; a daughter-in-law, two sons-in-law and 10 grandchildren.



Clockwise: L. Gordon Cooper with his fellow Mercury astronauts in Houston, in a 1963 photo. From left: Cooper, Wally Schirra (partially obscured), Alan Shepard, Gus Grissom, John Glenn, "Deke" Slayton and Scott Carpenter.

Full-length portrait of Cooper in spacesuit during Mercury-Atlas 9 prelaunch activities.

Cooper has a smile for the recovery crew of the U.S.S. Kearsarge, after he is on board from a successful 22-orbit mission of the Earth in his Mercury spacecraft "Faith 7."



"If I could share only one memory of Gordo, it would be his constant willingness to help others in as many different ways as he could," said Landwirth.

Following speeches by the astronauts and Landwirth, a photo and video montage of Cooper was shown and NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe gave his remarks.

"When Gordon was introduced to the country, NASA already knew what the public was about to find out: he was unflappable – a natural stick-and-rudder man – and he was also a character," said O'Keefe. "Even in his later years, when space flight was far behind him, he hoped for a space program that would again inspire the country."

O'Keefe presented Cooper's widow with the NASA Distinguished Service Medal – the Agency's highest honor. A downlink from the International Space Station showed Expedition 9 Flight Engineer and ISS Science Officer Mike Fincke, along with Commander Gennady Padalka, honoring Cooper with a moment of silence and a ringing of the Station's bell.

Guests then headed for the Memorial Tree Grove, where a tree was planted in Cooper's honor. A poignant T-38 flyover in the missing-man formation concluded the memorial.

"You could always depend on Gordo," said Glenn. "It's hard to believe he's not here in person, but I know he's here in spirit and I bet he's enjoying the whole thing."